



I was happy to sponsor Justin Turner, an Olympic High School sophomore, as a legislative page during the 2004 session. He was one of several 23rd District students who gave up a week of school to work for the House of Representatives and carry on a tradition that dates to 1891. Students 14-16 years old with at least a C+ average may apply to be pages next year; please phone my office (360-786-7842) for more information.

Report on the 2004 Legislative Session

Spring 2004

Dear Friends,

Some important progress was made during the recent legislative session. Education is one of my priorities, and we adopted important legislation that will improve our public school system. I'm protective of taxpayers' money, and the revisions we made to the state's budgets addressed issues without requiring new taxes. I want our neighborhoods to be safe, and after overcoming resistance from the majority party, I got to vote on a bill that clamps down on child molesters.

There were disappointments. Costs of liability insurance are climbing, but the House and Senate couldn't come to an agreement that would reform our civil justice system. And while I again secured House support for passenger-ferry funding, the Senate wouldn't go along.

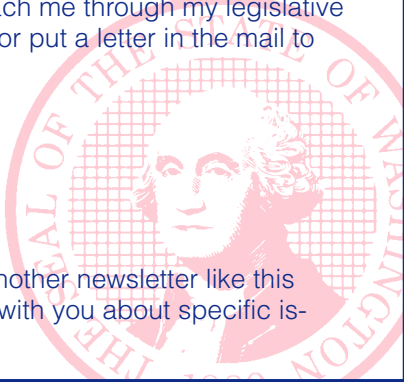
It's been a great privilege to serve as your state representative these past two years. I'll be out around the district a lot in the coming months, talking with people, so if you see me, please take a moment to say hello and share your thoughts with me. Also, you can reach me through my legislative e-mail address, get a message to me via the toll-free legislative hotline, or put a letter in the mail to me. I'm always ready to help.

Sincerely,

Beverly Woods

Beverly Woods

P.S. – Because this is an election year, state law says I can't send you another newsletter like this until after the November election. However, I am allowed to correspond with you about specific issues, so don't hesitate to get in touch!



State Representative Beverly Woods

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Report on the 2004 Legislative Session

Rep. Beverly Woods 23rd Legislative District Republican Caucus Chair

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- Transportation
- Capital Budget
- Rules
- Legislative Transportation Committee
- Joint Committee on Veterans' and Military Affairs

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There's still work to be done

A small fraction of the bills introduced in a legislative session make it all the way through the process to become law – and there's no guarantee a bill will succeed just because it does something helpful. Many of the bills I supported in 2004 would have helped create jobs and restore public trust in government, and I am hopeful they will become law in 2005. For example:

Reform the liability insurance system: I have no intention of limiting the ability of people to be compensated in court for medical expenses, lost wages, custodian or in-home care, or other measurable damages. I just want to do something about the rising liability costs that are forcing doctors out of practice, hampering employers and hurting local governments (in 2001, liability costs accounted for 16 percent of cities' budgets!). The situation has reached a crisis.

Unfortunately, the House would only pass a lightweight package of bills which fell so far short of real reform that the Senate wouldn't consider them. At the same time, a worthwhile and comprehensive tort reform bill passed by the Senate went nowhere in the House.

Increase the small-business tax credit: Bumping the tax credit from \$35 (set in 1994) to \$50 would help 17,000 small employers in our state to survive and compete. A bill to make this change attracted bipartisan sponsorship, but it didn't even get a public hearing.

Reduce the regulatory burden: If an agency believes its rules are worth imposing on our employers, it should be willing to submit its proposals to examination by your elected representatives. A classic example is the costly ergonomics rule imposed by the state in 2000: it probably would have been scrapped if it had been allowed to come before the Legislature. Instead, the voters took matters into their own hands last November and did away with the rule. A measure that would require legislative hearings on rules proposed by state agencies was not allowed a hearing by the majority party.

Make neighborhoods safer: Unfortunately, the 2004 session didn't bring approval of stronger penalties to deter auto theft, and methamphetamine manufacturing still isn't a "strike" under the state's "Three Strikes, You're Out" law.

Major issues of the 2004 session

Supplemental operating budget I voted YES



The Legislature increased spending on state programs by a fraction of a percent to care for our state's most vulnerable citizens in nursing homes, on children's Medicaid, and with developmental disabilities. The extra funding also will pay for roughly 3,000 new enrollments in higher education (good news for Olympic College) to help students compete in the new economy. The revised budget doesn't require a tax increase, but it also doesn't leave much in reserve: less than \$300 million, which is a bare minimum for dealing with emergencies, emerging needs and revenue changes between now and July 2005.

Supplemental capital budget I voted YES



I serve on the House Capital Budget Committee, which considers state construction projects (school buildings, park facilities, etc.) for funding. I voted against the House's supplemental capital budget this session because the majority party tried to change or set policies with its spending choices. That's not appropriate. Fortunately, the compromise budget that resulted from negotiations between the House and Republican-controlled Senate was much more in line with what a capital budget should be – a plan for investing in our communities. The changes allowed me to support it.

Charter schools and WASL improvements I voted YES



“Alternative” schools are found in many districts already. After many years of work, Washington has become the 42nd state to authorize the development of another education alternative: charter schools. A six-year pilot project will create up to 45 charter schools statewide, offering students more options, personal attention, second chances, and smaller class sizes. Authority and oversight will remain with the locally elected school board, and the decision to enroll a student in a charter school belongs to the parent or guardian.

Legislators also agreed on significant improvements to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. What students are expected to know to meet state academic standards for graduation will be made clear. Students will have the opportunity to take the WASL up to four times and can use alternative means in taking it. And if a student isn't meeting requirements early on, parents and teachers will work together to develop a graduation plan.

Clamping down on those who hurt children I voted YES



The Child Protection Act of 2004, which was sidelined by the majority party in the House but revived and adopted because of strong public outcry, makes major revisions to the state's Special Sex Offender Sentencing Alternative law (SSOSA). In the past that law has allowed offenders to serve only up to six months in jail and then enter state-supervised treatment in the community, often to the horror of child victims and their families (as happened in the Gig Harbor case that prompted the bill). Now it will be more difficult for sex offenders to qualify for the SSOSA program, and those who do will be on a shorter leash when they are in our communities. I was proud to co-sponsor the even-tougher original form of this bill.

Safer schools: I helped pass Senate Bill 5533, which takes effect June 10, strengthening protections against teachers and coaches who prey on children.

A new primary for Washington voters .. I voted YES



This session we had to come up with a replacement for the popular “blanket” primary because the state's major political parties successfully sued to get rid of the blanket primary, claiming it violated their constitutional right of association. The Senate approved a “Top 2” system. I and other House members added a backup plan to the Senate bill: an “open” primary like Montana's. That's because we were concerned the Top 2 system could be challenged successfully in court like the blanket primary was,

The revised Top 2 bill passed by a narrow margin. Then the governor, who doesn't like the Top 2 system, unexpectedly used his veto power to strike that part of the legislation and make the open primary our new primary.

Unlike the blanket primary, the open primary requires voters to choose the ballot of a single party on election day, and all candidates a voter selects for partisan offices must be with that political party. However, it continues the tradition of giving all major parties a place on the November ballot. Your voting decisions, including which party ballot you choose, are still kept private, and you won't have to formally register as a member of a political party.

I'm expecting the governor's action to be challenged, and I'm worried the challenges won't be resolved in time to allow a September primary. In that case, all candidates might move directly to the November general election ballot. I don't think anyone wants to see that, especially when so many offices (the Presidency, all 98 state House seats, and so on) are up for election.

Tax incentives for rural and high-tech employers I voted YES



I'd like to see more high-tech companies in Kitsap County, which is why I was glad to support changes to the state's tax code to help stimulate economic development. The first renews tax incentives for employers who locate in rural areas. The second to renew a set of tax credits associated with research and development or pilot-scale manufacturing in high-technology industries. Hundreds of small high-tech firms across Washington have benefited from the tax credits and exemptions, which also are vital for supporting industries designated as “targets” like advanced computing, semiconductors and biotechnology. The incentives, created in 1994, would have expired this year without legislative action.

Better access to health care I voted YES



Seventy-six percent of Washingtonians work for small businesses, but less than half of those small employers (50 people or less) offer health plans to their workers. That's because our state requires health care plans to cover 47 procedures – in Idaho, by comparison, it's only 7 procedures. That puts health care coverage out of reach for many small employers. It also means employers who can no longer afford “the works” must either drop health coverage or ask employees to pay higher premiums. It would help if carriers could offer a more affordable basic plan in addition to a gold-plated plan, to help employers find something in their price range. The Legislature adopted House Bill 2460, which reduced some requirements, but I hope this issue is revisited in 2005.

Help for senior citizens I voted YES



For years I've co-sponsored legislation to give seniors relief from the burden of ever-increasing property taxes. This year we finally passed a bill increasing the maximum income eligibility for seniors and retired disabled people to receive exemptions from a portion of their property tax bills. I also helped pass legislation allowing insurance companies to again offer discounts on Medicare Supplement insurance for various payment methods, including electronic fund transfers or annual installments. Spousal discounts are also authorized in the new law. Seniors who testified on the legislation said losing the discounts would force them to pay at least \$100 more a year for their health care coverage because the price break saved them at least \$9 a month.

Support for ferries ...I'll KEEP FIGHTING

The supplemental transportation budget agreed to by the Legislature includes a little more than \$3 million to improve the Vashon and Southworth terminals, to accommodate passenger-only ferries. That's good news because it will continue to keep Washington State Ferries involved with passenger-only ferries. However, the state Senate – which clearly prefers asphalt highways over our “marine highways” – refused other ferry system expenditures that the House supported.

As a result, there's no money to preserve the Chinook-class passenger-only boats within the fleet (to protect them from being sold) and no money to complete a fourth new auto-ferry boat sooner.

My goal is to restore the convenient, reliable ferry service we used to have in Kitsap, especially Bremerton. WSF has cut auto ferry routes to Bremerton, done away with passenger ferries, and failed to maintain onboard food service, yet fares have *climbed an average of 27 percent in three years*. You deserve better, and I introduced several bills this session aimed at starting the turnaround.

Unfortunately, headlines such as “Auditor slams state ferries” won't make it easier to convince other legislators to support the improved ferry service I want for Kitsap residents. Several years ago I had secured approximately \$6 million to upgrade the accounting system as soon as possible and get fare collection under control. That has yet to occur.

While I'm not going to give up, it sure would help if Washington State Ferries ran a tighter ship. Someone has to stand up for the customers, and if it takes additional laws to get WSF back on course and under control, I'm willing to make them.

